# Focus Group Discussion Method

A student-friendly lecture on planning, conducting, analysing, and reporting focus group discussions in research.

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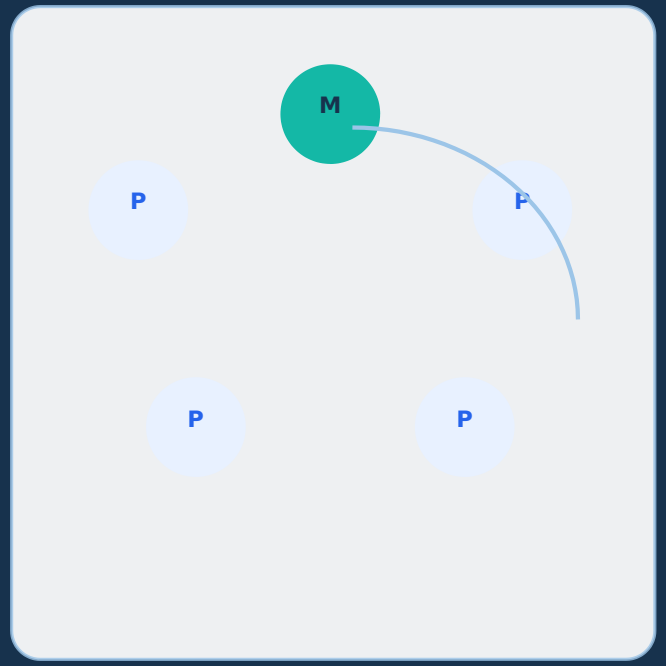


# Lecture Overview



Meaning, purpose, and academic use of focus group discussion (FGD).
Major concepts: moderation, group interaction, questioning route, saturation, and thematic analysis.
Types of FGDs and when to choose each type.
Step-by-step process for planning, conducting, analysing, and reporting an FGD.
Examples, ethics, common mistakes, classroom activity, and knowledge check.

**Big idea**

A focus group is not simply several interviews at once. Its main value comes from participants reacting to, comparing, questioning, and building on each other’s views.

# Learning Objectives



1

## Define

Explain what an FGD is and how it differs from interviews and surveys.

2

## Design

Plan a focus group study aligned with a research problem and question.

3

## Recruit

Select suitable participants and justify group composition.

4

## Moderate

Identify effective moderator techniques and questioning strategies.

5

## Analyse

Describe how FGD data are transcribed, coded, and interpreted.

6

## Evaluate

Assess strengths, limitations, ethics, and quality issues in FGD research.

# Introduction



Focus group discussion is a qualitative data collection method in which a small group of selected participants discuss a topic guided by a moderator. The researcher studies both what participants say and how ideas are formed through group interaction.

### 1 Research value

Explores beliefs, meanings, and experiences
Reveals shared language and social norms
Helps generate ideas for later surveys

### 2 Common uses

Needs assessment
Program evaluation
Policy consultation
Product or service feedback

### 3 Best fit

Exploratory questions
Sensitive but discussable topics
Studies needing interaction data

### 4 Not ideal for

Measuring prevalence
Private experiences that require privacy
Topics needing statistical generalization

# Key Definitions



### Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

A guided group conversation used to collect qualitative data on perceptions, experiences, and meanings.

### Group Interaction

The way participants respond to, challenge, support, or build on each other’s ideas.

### Moderator

The person who facilitates discussion, asks questions, manages time, and encourages balanced participation.

### Saturation

The point at which additional groups add little new information to the analysis.

### Questioning Route

A planned sequence of opening, introductory, transition, key, and closing questions.

### Thematic Analysis

A common qualitative approach for identifying patterns, themes, and meanings in FGD transcripts.

# Background and Academic Context



FGD has roots in the “focused interview,” associated with early communication and social research.
It later became widely used in market research, health research, education, evaluation, development studies, and social science research.
FGD is typically qualitative, but it may be combined with surveys or experiments in mixed-methods designs.
The method is especially useful for understanding how people discuss shared experiences, social norms, and contested meanings.

> FGD sits between everyday conversation and formal interviewing: it is planned, moderated, and analysed systematically.

# Main Concepts in FGD

CONCEPTS

### 1 Interaction as data

Researcher examines how participants agree, disagree, clarify, and compare experiences.

### 2 Purposeful sampling

Participants are selected because they can provide relevant perspectives.

### 3 Facilitation, not teaching

Moderator guides discussion without leading participants toward a preferred answer.

### 4 Flexible but systematic

The discussion guide provides structure while allowing spontaneous insights.

### 5 Context matters

Group setting, power differences, culture, language, and topic sensitivity influence responses.

### 6 Interpretation requires care

Data reflect group talk and social interaction, not simply individual private opinions.

# When to Use Focus Group Discussion



## ✓ Use FGD when you want to:

Explore attitudes, perceptions, and shared meanings.
Understand how participants discuss a topic together.
Generate ideas, categories, or language for survey items.
Evaluate a program, course, policy, product, or service.
Compare perspectives across groups, such as students and teachers.

## ! Avoid or reconsider FGD when:

The goal is statistical measurement or prevalence estimation.
Participants may be harmed by discussing the topic publicly.
The topic requires highly private, confidential, or traumatic disclosure.
Power differences may silence participants.
Logistics make balanced participation impossible.

# Participant Selection and Group Composition

DESIGN DECISIONS

Participants should be selected because they have relevant experience with the research topic. The group must be similar enough to feel comfortable, but diverse enough to generate meaningful discussion.

### Size

Commonly 6–10 participants; smaller groups work better for sensitive or complex topics.

### Homogeneity

Participants share key characteristics related to the study, such as role, age group, or experience.

### Diversity

Include enough variation to reveal different views without creating intimidation or conflict.

### Recruitment

Use purposeful, criterion-based, or maximum variation sampling depending on the research aim.

### Number of groups

Conduct multiple groups until themes are clear and variation is adequately captured.

### Exclusions

Avoid mixing people when hierarchy, conflict, or confidentiality concerns may silence honest discussion.

# Types of Focus Group Discussions

TYPES

### In-person FGD

Participants meet face-to-face in a room.

### Online / virtual FGD

Discussion occurs by video call, chat, or online platform.

### Mini FGD

Smaller group, often 3–5 participants, useful for depth.

### Expert FGD

Participants are specialists, professionals, or key informants.

### Homogeneous FGD

Participants share important characteristics.

### Heterogeneous FGD

Participants differ by role, experience, or viewpoint.

# In-Person and Online Focus Groups

TYPES

| Feature | In-person FGD | Online / Virtual FGD |
|---|---|---|
| Environment | Shared physical room; easier to observe body language. | Video, audio, or text platform; easier to reach dispersed participants. |
| Logistics | Needs venue, travel, refreshments, and recording equipment. | Needs stable internet, privacy, digital consent, and platform familiarity. |
| Interaction | Often richer non-verbal cues and group energy. | Can be convenient, but turn-taking and silence may require more facilitation. |
| Risk | Dominant voices or social pressure may occur. | Technical problems, unequal access, and privacy risks may occur. |

# Mini, Expert, Homogeneous and Mixed Groups

TYPES

M

## Mini FGD

3–5 participants
Useful for complex topics
More speaking time per person
Works well with busy participants

E

## Expert FGD

Participants have specialized knowledge
Useful for policy, professional practice, or technical topics
Moderator needs topic familiarity

H

## Homogeneous FGD

Similar participant characteristics
Promotes comfort and openness
Common in student, patient, or community studies

X

## Mixed FGD

Different roles or viewpoints
Useful for comparing perspectives
Requires careful facilitation to reduce power imbalance

# Step-by-Step FGD Process

PROCESS

1

## Design

Clarify aim, research question, and group strategy.

2

## Recruit

Select and invite suitable participants ethically.

3

## Prepare

Develop guide, consent materials, venue, and recording plan.

4

## Moderate

Facilitate balanced, respectful discussion.

5

## Analyse

Transcribe, code, identify themes, and interpret interaction.

6

## Report

Present methods, evidence, limitations, and implications.

# Step 1: Planning and Recruiting

PROCESS

Define the research purpose: exploration, evaluation, needs assessment, or idea generation.
Write a clear research question that requires qualitative group interaction.
Decide how many groups are needed and which participant categories should be represented.
Create inclusion and exclusion criteria based on the study purpose.
Prepare invitation materials, consent forms, scheduling procedures, and accessibility support.

### Recruitment checklist

- Relevant experience
- Comfortable group setting
- No coercion
- Balanced group composition

### Practical tip

Recruit more people than needed because some invited participants may not attend. Keep a waiting list and confirm attendance politely.

### Quality question

Can each participant contribute meaningfully to the research question?

# Step 2: Developing the Discussion Guide

PROCESS

1. **Opening** — Easy introductions and comfort-building questions.
2. **Introductory** — General experiences with the topic.
3. **Transition** — Move from broad experience to the specific research issue.
4. **Key** — Core questions that answer the research question.
5. **Closing** — Final reflections, missing points, and participant validation.

## Example key questions

What challenges do students face when using online learning tools?
Which features help learning most? Why?
How do students compare online tools with face-to-face support?
What changes would make the platform more useful?

# Step 3: Moderating the Discussion

PROCESS

Moderation is the skill of guiding discussion without controlling participants’ answers. A good moderator listens carefully, probes neutrally, manages group dynamics, and keeps the discussion aligned with the research purpose.

M

## Moderator roles

Welcome participants and explain ground rules
Ask open-ended questions
Probe for examples and meanings
Protect respectful turn-taking

P

## Useful probes

“Can you give an example?”
“What makes you say that?”
“Does anyone see it differently?”
“How common is that experience?”

!

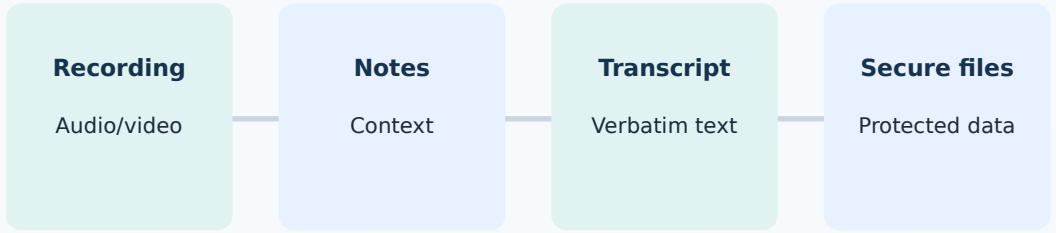
## Avoid

Leading questions
Judging responses
Arguing with participants
Letting one person dominate

# Step 4: Recording and Data Management

PROCESS

Use audio or video recording only with informed consent.
Assign a note-taker to document non-verbal cues, group dynamics, and key moments.
Use participant codes instead of full names in notes and transcripts.
Store recordings, transcripts, and consent forms securely and separately where appropriate.
Prepare a debriefing note immediately after the session while details are fresh.




**Instructor note**

Data management is part of research ethics, not just administration.

# Step 5: Transcription and Analysis

PROCESS

### 1 Transcribe

Convert audio/video into text and label speakers.

### 2 Familiarize

Read transcripts and field notes repeatedly.

### 3 Code

Mark meaningful words, ideas, and interaction moments.

### 4 Develop themes

Group related codes into broader patterns.

### 5 Interpret

Connect themes to research question and context.

### 6 Validate

Check evidence, contradictions, and alternative explanations.

> In FGD analysis, do not only count repeated words. Look for meaning, context, disagreement, consensus, and how ideas develop during interaction.

# Reporting FGD Findings

PROCESS

A strong FGD report explains how the study was designed, who participated, how the data were collected and analysed, and what themes emerged from the discussion.

### Methods section

Purpose, sampling, group composition, setting, duration, moderator role, recording, and analysis approach.

### Findings section

Themes supported by evidence, participant quotations, group differences, and interaction patterns.

### Quality section

Limitations, reflexivity, ethical protections, and steps taken to increase trustworthiness.

### Implications

How findings inform theory, practice, policy, design, or future research.

# Practical Examples Across Disciplines

EXAMPLES

### S Social sciences

Explore how young adults discuss civic participation in their community.

### B Business & management

Understand employee perceptions of a new performance appraisal system.

### E Education

Evaluate students’ experiences with blended learning in a university course.

### H Health sciences

Explore patient barriers to attending follow-up appointments.

### P Psychology

Investigate how adolescents describe peer pressure and coping strategies.

### IT Information technology

Study user expectations for privacy, trust, and usability in a mobile app.

# Detailed Research Scenario

RESEARCH EXAMPLE

### Research topic

Student experiences with AI writing tools in university coursework.

### Research problem

Students use AI tools, but universities need to understand perceived benefits, risks, and ethical concerns.

### Research question

How do undergraduate students perceive the academic use of AI writing tools?

| | |
|---|---|
| **Participants** | Three FGDs with 6–8 students per group from different faculties. |
| **Data collection** | Semi-structured questioning route; audio recording; field notes on group interaction. |
| **Data analysis** | Thematic analysis of transcripts, with attention to consensus, disagreement, and examples. |
| **Expected interpretation** | Themes may show perceived productivity, learning support, academic integrity concerns, and need for clear institutional guidance. |

# Advantages of Focus Group Discussion



### ✓ Depth and richness

Participants explain reasons, meanings, and experiences in their own words.

### ✓ Group interaction

Participants trigger memories, compare viewpoints, and build on each other’s ideas.

### ✓ Efficiency

One session can gather perspectives from several participants.

### ✓ Exploratory value

Useful for developing concepts, hypotheses, questionnaires, and interventions.

### ✓ Practical feedback

Valuable for evaluating programs, products, policies, teaching methods, and services.

### ✓ Inclusive potential

Can support participation from people who may prefer group discussion to formal interviews.

# Limitations and Challenges

EVALUATION

### Limited generalization

FGD findings do not statistically represent a wider population.

### Dominant voices

Some participants may speak too much while others remain silent.

### Social desirability

Participants may present acceptable opinions rather than honest views.

### Confidentiality limits

Researchers cannot fully control what participants share after the session.

### Analysis complexity

Group data include overlapping talk, interaction, context, and contradictions.

### Logistics

Recruitment, scheduling, transcription, and facilitation require time and skill.

# Common Mistakes in FGD Research



Using FGD when the research question actually requires a survey, experiment, or individual interview.
Recruiting participants who are too different, too similar, or affected by power relationships.
Writing leading, double-barrelled, or overly academic discussion questions.
Allowing one participant to dominate while quieter participants are ignored.
Treating FGD as a set of individual interview answers and ignoring interaction among participants.
Reporting findings without enough methodological detail, quotations, or reflexivity.

? **Quick self-check**

Does the question require group discussion?
Can participants speak safely?
Are questions open and neutral?
Is analysis planned before data collection?
Will findings be reported transparently?

# Best Practices for High-Quality FGDs

QUALITY

1

## Align design

Make every decision serve the research question.

2

## Pilot the guide

Test questions for clarity, flow, timing, and sensitivity.

3

## Use skilled moderation

Encourage balanced participation and neutral probing.

4

## Document context

Record group composition, setting, session length, and notable dynamics.

5

## Analyse systematically

Use transparent coding, theme development, and evidence trails.

6

## Reflect on bias

Consider how moderator identity, assumptions, and group dynamics shaped data.

# Comparison Table: FGD, Interview and Survey

COMPARISON

| Feature | Focus Group Discussion | Individual Interview | Survey |
|---|---|---|---|
| Main purpose | Explore shared meanings and group interaction | Explore personal experiences in depth | Measure patterns across many respondents |
| Data type | Qualitative group talk | Qualitative individual narratives | Mostly quantitative responses |
| Participant setting | Several participants together | One participant at a time | Many respondents separately |
| Researcher role | Moderator facilitates discussion | Interviewer asks and probes | Questionnaire designer collects standardized data |
| Best for | Social norms, perceptions, program feedback | Sensitive personal experiences, life stories | Prevalence, comparisons, statistical testing |
| Key limitation | Group pressure and limited generalization | Time-intensive and interviewer effects | Limited depth and fixed response options |

# Ethical Considerations



Informed consent: explain purpose, recording, voluntary participation, risks, and right to withdraw.
Confidentiality: ask participants not to share others' comments, but be honest that full confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in a group.
Privacy: use participant codes, secure storage, and careful handling of transcripts and quotations.
Power and vulnerability: avoid grouping people where hierarchy, dependency, or fear may silence honest discussion.
Sensitive topics: provide support information, allow non-response, and avoid unnecessary distress.
Transparency: disclose the moderator's role, funding, incentives, and how findings will be used.

**Ethics reminder**

Ethical FGD research requires more than signed consent. Researchers must actively create a respectful environment and protect participants' dignity throughout the study.

# Classroom Activity: Design a Mini FGD

ACTIVITY

## Activity objective

Students will design a mini focus group plan for a realistic research problem and justify core methodological choices.

## Instructions

Choose one topic: online learning, campus safety, AI tool use, or health service access.
Write one FGD research question.
Define participants and group composition.
Draft three open-ended key questions.
Identify one ethical risk and one solution.

## Expected outcome

Each group presents a concise FGD plan that links the research question, participants, discussion guide, ethics, and analysis strategy.

# Discussion Questions

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

When is group interaction more valuable than individual privacy?
How can a moderator encourage quiet participants without pressuring them?
What types of topics should not be studied through FGD?
How might power differences affect discussion quality?
How can online focus groups be made inclusive and ethical?
What evidence should appear in a strong FGD findings section?
How can a researcher show reflexivity in FGD research?

# Knowledge Check

ASSESSMENT

1. What is the main difference between an FGD and several individual interviews?
2. Which role does the moderator play in an FGD?
3. Name two situations where FGD may not be appropriate.
4. Which sampling approach is commonly used for selecting FGD participants?
5. What is a questioning route?
6. Why is confidentiality more difficult in FGD than in individual interviews?
7. Which analysis approach is commonly used for FGD transcripts?
8. Multiple choice: The best FGD questions are usually: A) leading, B) open-ended, C) yes/no only, D) statistical.

# Knowledge Check: Answer Key

ASSESSMENT

**1** FGD uses interaction among participants as data; interviews focus on individual responses.

**2** The moderator facilitates discussion, probes neutrally, manages group dynamics, and keeps focus.

**3** Examples: highly private/sensitive topics, strong power differences, need for statistical prevalence.

**4** Purposeful sampling, often criterion-based or maximum variation sampling.

**5** A planned sequence of open-ended questions guiding the discussion.

**6** Other participants hear comments, so researchers cannot guarantee what they will share afterward.

**7** Thematic analysis is common, often supported by coding and field notes.

**8** B) Open-ended.

# Key Takeaways

SUMMARY

### FGD is qualitative

It explores meanings, experiences, perceptions, and social interaction.

### Interaction is central

The group discussion itself is part of the data.

### Design matters

Participants, questions, moderation, and ethics must align with the research question.

### Not for statistics

FGD does not produce statistically generalizable prevalence estimates.

### Analysis is systematic

Transcripts, field notes, codes, themes, and reflexivity support credible findings.

### Ethics are complex

Privacy, consent, power, and confidentiality require careful planning.

# Conclusion



Focus group discussion is a powerful qualitative method for understanding how people describe, negotiate, and make sense of experiences in a social setting. It helps researchers explore complex questions that cannot be fully answered through numbers alone.

When planned carefully, moderated ethically, and analysed systematically, FGD can produce rich insights for academic research, program evaluation, policy development, education, health, business, psychology, and technology studies.

**Final reminder**

Choose FGD because the research question needs dialogue, comparison, and interaction—not simply because participants are available.

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# Thank You

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